For MAGA Faithful, Election Boils Down to ‘Saving the American Dream’

February 16, 2024 **by Dan McCue**

NORTH CHARLESTON, S.C. — It was a Wednesday afternoon, and anyone driving along International Blvd., past the Hilton Hotel and the Starbucks, not to mention the convention and performing arts center in between, could see Charles Hibbs from a mile away.

Standing beneath a blue, 6-by-10-foot “Trump 2024” banner and a smaller red “Make Our Country Great Again” flag, both affixed to a length of reinforced PVC pipe, Hibbs smiled broadly and waved as passersby intermittently greeted him with a toot of their horns.

“Well, I guess I’m going to be a celebrity,” he announced as one drew nearer, his voice resigned, but his eyes dancing with mischief. “Fox News just put me on.”

“To tell you the truth, I was thinking of breaking this down for awhile,” he said, referring to the banners. “I’ve been out here four hours already.

“But people seem to be enjoying it, so I’ll probably keep them flying a little while longer before I take a break,” he said.

Full disclosure — this wasn’t the first time The Well News had run into Hibbs on the 2024 campaign trail. A month ago, he was in Iowa, having left his home in White River, South Dakota, to show his support for the former president in Cedar Rapids and Fort Dodge.

Charles Hibbs outside the Charleston Area Convention Center on Wednesday. (Photo by Dan McCue)

It was shortly after we’d crossed paths the first time that Hibbs learned Trump was planning a rally in Conway, South Carolina.

Weighing his options — 13 degrees in South Dakota, closer to 70 in South Carolina — Hibbs immediately set out “to support our president” in Conway, a small city on the outskirts of Myrtle Beach.

“That’s when I heard he was also going to be here and I thought, ‘Well, it’s only another 100 miles, I’ve got to drive down there.’ And here I am,” he said.

Asked how he financed his trip, Hibbs mentioned a friend who’d secured him “some work” in Florida.

“Frankly, I didn’t expect that to happen, but I’m going to go down there and then we’ll both be back here for the primary,” he said.

The next question Hibbs was asked was, why? Why was he so devoted to the former president?

“Well, because he doesn’t have to do this,” Hibbs began. “He’s a billionaire. He could have just gone on making money. But he cares enough about the children and the grandchildren in this country to try to fix the things that are broken.

“For instance, we’ve got a deficit of something like, $1.8 billion and debt held by the public approaching $28 billion. How are we ever going to be able to pay for that?” he asked. “Trump is going to break that down.

“And then when his term is done, he’s going to let whoever comes in follow in his footprints, which is abiding by the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. These documents are not outdated.

“We are people who stand on our own two feet. We don’t need a government telling us how to live our lives,” Hibbs said. “Our

government was formed for one reason — to protect the boundaries of this nation from tyrant nations. And now we have a tyrant, right now, within this administration.

“It’s very simple,” he added.

Trump has always done well with events in North Charleston.

Four years ago, when he packed the 13,000-seat coliseum here, the parking lot outside the massive building filled with Trump admirers and fans a good 36-to-48 hours before his arrival, transforming the lot into a cross between a tent city and a tailgate party.

The mood — weeks before the 2020 election, the Jan. 6 riots, the second impeachment and multiple indictments of the former president — was festive.

All day long, two large screens paid for by the Trump campaign “broadcast” Trump TV, a series of ‘newscasts’ featuring various Trump family members as anchors. At night, they brought the sights and sounds of the event inside, to the overflow crowd outside.

This year, to the dismay of some early arrivals, things were very different. The wide open parking lot that had been the setting for the Grateful Dead-fan-like hangout in 2020 was long gone, having been replaced during the intervening years by two elevated parking garages.

With the exception of a mobile billboard paid for by Stand for America PAC, an organization backing former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, who is competing against Trump in the primary, no large screens could be found anywhere.

Instead of basking in the abundant sunshine, early arrivals and vendors gathered in the shaded first floor of one of the parking garages.

"I thought it would be like last time," said one sad-faced woman who'd arrived at about 6 p.m. the previous night.

"And now I hear he's not even going to be in the coliseum, but the smaller venue next door," she said.

"It'll be all right," another member of the line said. "I hear he's coming back on primary night for a full-blown victory celebration in the coliseum."

Elsewhere on the line, other early arrivals were talking about a huge outdoor event rumored to be planned for Camden, South Carolina, on Feb. 23, the day before the Republican primary in the state.

"I hear they're planning for 45,000 people," somebody said.

Not far from where this conversation was taking place, a group consisting of both North and South Carolina residents was asked if they'd mind talking to a reporter.

"Are you going to tell the truth?"

Even after being offered assurances, none of the group would give their names. Finally one stepped forward and said, "You can just call me a South Carolina voter."

The voter said the one thing that united the group was "we all love this country and see Donald Trump as one of our own."

"Look at what he did for us for years," another member of the group called out. "And yet all he gets for his efforts is persecuted. Frankly, we're tired of him being persecuted when he's done

nothing wrong. … Meanwhile Beijing Biden has done nothing but sell our country out to the Chinese.

“And most Americans can’t survive another four years of Joe Biden or the Democratic Party, from a financial standpoint,” the voter said. “Whatever happened to the American dream? It’s gone. I certainly don’t know anybody who is living it.”

The pending campaign rally at the North Charleston Convention Center would be Trump’s second event in the Palmetto State in four days.

As he has for much of the past six weeks or so, the former president has been balancing appearances on the campaign trail with those in various courtrooms where he faces more than 90 federal and state charges.

Of the 200 or 300 hundred people who were already on line a good seven hours before Trump was scheduled to arrive, there wasn’t one who expressed concern about the charges themselves.

“It’s all about election interference,” said Gary from Charleston, who was standing in line with his wife, Brenda.

“I’m very concerned about our ability to get a fair election, given all that went on that last time,” he said.

Asked if either had taken advantage of South Carolina’s early voting to lock in their preference for Trump, both shook their head no.

“That’s one of the ways the other side cheats, with the absentee and mail-in ballots that just suddenly appear,” Brenda said.

“If you want to be sure that your vote gets counted in this election, you have to vote in person, on election day,” she added.

The couple went on to cite almost every claim that Trump’s personal attorney, former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, made immediately after the 2020 election — that poll workers in Georgia were passing around USB drives loaded with suspicious votes; that other ballots, all for Joe Biden, were suddenly “found” under tables in a vote-counting room in Atlanta, Georgia; and that bushels full of Biden ballots mysteriously appeared overnight in Detroit, Michigan, long after polls had closed.

All of these assertions have been shot down by election officials, and in December, a federal judge ordered Giuliani to pay two former Georgia election workers $148 million for spreading lies about them.

“Trump lost the election because it was stolen from him,” Brenda said emphatically.

“Nobody is ever going to convince me otherwise,” she said.

A short distance from the parking garage, Harold from Lexington County, South Carolina, was driving his pickup truck around the last remaining vestige of the old parking field near the coliseum.

Wearing a cap with the slogan, “Jesus is my lord, Trump is my president,” Harold had decorated his truck with a half dozen American flags of various sizes and several Trump-themed flags, including one that said, “Let’s Go, Brandon,” a derogatory dig at Biden.

When he slowed to a stop at one point, he too said all the charges flung at Trump were simply another means by which Democrats were trying to “rig” the election against the former president.

“I’m looking forward to him getting all the money back that he’s spent on all this litigation when the dust settles,” Harold said.

“And I hope that people will finally come to see that those who brought these cases against him abused their power and broke with our Constitution.

“I mean, he shows up in court with the evidence to prove his innocence, and they won’t even let him speak in court — what is that?” he said.

Harold also went on to address another subject very much on the minds of those waiting for Trump — Nikki Haley’s refusal to get out of the race for the Republican nomination.

“I voted for Nikki Haley twice for governor, though I held my nose both times as I did so, but I’ll tell you, I’ll never vote for her again,” he said. “She’s in the pocket of the Democrats. They are [the ones] keeping her funded and keeping her in this race.

“But she’s going to learn that elections have consequences,” Harold said. “Personally, I think her political career is over.”

Sally from Hanahan, South Carolina, decked out in sparkling red, white and blue, agreed.

“She’s with the wrong people,” Sally said of Haley. “We can see who she is aligned with right now, and the division she’s causing in the party and you have to ask yourself, ‘Why?’ I mean, it’s clear, Donald Trump is going to be the nominee of our party.

“The way I look at the situation is, she’s causing her own downfall,” Sally continued. “Honestly, there are a lot of people here who will probably never vote for her again for anything because of what she’s doing right now.”

Brian, a Biker for Trump, also said he believes Haley has no way to come back from her challenge of Trump.

“No. That’s it. She’s done,” he said.

Brian then went on to say that he actually has attended a Haley rally.

“It was at Coastal Carolina University, and there may have been about 100 people there, but the strange thing about it was everybody I talked to had evil eyes,” he said.

“I mean, you don’t have evil eyes. You have kind eyes. But when you see people’s eyes, you know they’re Democrats right off the bat.”

“How so?”

“Because you see the devil in their eyes.”

“Like I said, your eyes are more peaceful, friendly,” Brian said.

“The most important thing to me is Trump’s record. He had the border under control. He tore up a trade agreement with China that was the worst trade agreement maybe ever. He made sure other world powers were paying their fair share for NATO.

“And the thing I’ll never forget is how he and Melania went over to Iraq to celebrate Christmas with the troops,” Brian said. “Nobody’s done that, probably since President Nixon and his wife did that in 1969.

“Trump is what this country needs right now. He’s for the people, Black, White, men and women. He’s our man,” Brian said.

Trump finally took the stage at around 7:30 p.m. Wednesday night.

Speaking of Haley, he pointed to the latest Winthrop University poll which shows him beating her on primary day by a 2-1 margin.

“Her numbers are tanking,” Trump said. “And she’s getting angrier and crazier.”

“She’s suffering deeper and deeper scars from Trump derangement syndrome,” he said.

Trump also predicted that Biden won’t be the Democratic candidate he faces in the fall.

“Personally I don’t think he makes it to the starting gate,” he said, though he didn’t go on to suggest who he thinks the candidate may be.

Predictably, but also to the delight of those who had waited so many hours to see him, Trump also teased the possibility that Sen. Tim Scott, R-S.C., who dropped his own presidential bid and endorsed him, might be his running mate in the fall.

“I called him and I said, you know, you’re a much better candidate for me than you were for yourself. This guy is the best, he was like a different person,” Trump said.

“And I say that with admiration because I’m the opposite. I’m much better for me than I would be for someone else.

“But that shows great character with Tim, and I mean that so strongly,” Trump said before twice saying, “He’s amazing.”

With that, a large cheer went up from the crowd.

Trump then hedged, by adding, “But we do have a lot of great people.”

And he inspired even louder cheers when he declared he would never consider making Haley his running mate if he wins the GOP nomination.

The former president closed his remarks by urging everyone who can to get out and vote on primary day.

“If you want to save America, vote for Trump. Get out and vote. Vote Republican,” he said.

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(All photos by Dan McCue)

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